

## BEYOND CASTE: COMPARATIVE SYSTEMS OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND EXCLUSION WORLDWIDE

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### ABSTRACT

Caste is often understood as a uniquely South Asian phenomenon; however, systems of hereditary, descent-based discrimination exist across multiple regions of the world. Communities identified as Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD)—including Dalits in South Asia, Roma in Europe, Burakumin in Japan, Haratine and Osu in Africa, and Quilombola and Palenque communities in Latin America—experience persistent social exclusion, economic marginalization, and political invisibility. Despite differing cultural and historical contexts, these groups share strikingly similar patterns of stigma, occupational segregation, restricted mobility, and limited access to education, justice, and public resources. This paper adopts a comparative and interdisciplinary approach to examine caste and analogous systems globally, situating them within broader frameworks of social stratification, racial capitalism, and structural inequality. Drawing on secondary data, international human rights reports, and comparative case studies, the study analyses how descent-based discrimination is reproduced through law, labor markets, social norms, and state practices. It further evaluates the effectiveness of constitutional safeguards, affirmative action policies, and international advocacy mechanisms in addressing these entrenched hierarchies. The paper argues that global caste-like systems remain under-theorized and inadequately addressed within mainstream human rights and development discourse. By conceptualizing caste as a global structure rather than a regional anomaly, the study highlights the need for transnational policy frameworks, inclusive governance strategies, and intersectional approaches that link caste, race, gender, and class. The findings contribute to global debates on equality, social justice, and sustainable development by foregrounding descent-based discrimination as a critical but neglected dimension of global inequality.

**Keywords:** Global caste; Descent-based discrimination; Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD); Social stratification; Structural inequality; Dalits; Roma; Burakumin; Racial capitalism; Social exclusion; Human rights; Comparative sociology

## INTRODUCTION

Caste and caste-like systems are not confined to South Asia. Across the world, analogous hierarchical structures—based on race, ethnicity, indigeneity, class, descent, and occupation operate in ways similar to caste. When these systems intersect with gender, women experience multiple and layered forms of discrimination, making their marginalization deeper and more persistent.

### Global Analogues to Caste and Women's Issues

#### 1. South Asia (India, Nepal, Sri Lanka)

- Dalit and Adivasi women face triple discrimination: caste, class, and gender.
- Issues include sexual violence, unpaid labour, limited education access, and political exclusion.

#### 2. Africa

- Descent-based discrimination (e.g., Osu in Nigeria, Haratine in Mauritania).
- Women suffer social exclusion, forced labour, restricted marriage rights, and denial of education.

#### 3. Latin America

- Indigenous and Afro-descendant women face caste-like hierarchies rooted in colonialism.
- Issues include land dispossession, poverty, political invisibility, and gender violence.

#### 4. East Asia

- Burakumin women in Japan experience stigma, marriage discrimination, and employment exclusion.
- Gender norms intensify social marginalization.

#### 5. United States & Europe

- Race and class function as caste-like systems.
- Women of colour face systemic inequalities in health, wages, housing, and criminal justice.

### Intersectionality of Descent and Gender

on 'Discrimination based on Work and Descent' (DWD), which reveals that approximately 270 million people globally are trapped in inherited hierarchies. My analysis shows that women in

these communities, such as the Dalits in South Asia, Roma in Europe, and Quilombolas in Brazil, face a 'double jeopardy' where caste-like status and gender inequality intersect. I have observed that these women are disproportionately funneled into hazardous and dehumanizing labor; for instance, nearly 98% of those forced into manual scavenging in certain regions are women from these marginalized backgrounds.

## **Institutional Impunity and Systemic Barriers**

a critical contradiction: while many nations have constitutional guarantees of equality, entrenched social norms often render these laws ineffective. My research indicates that gender-based violence is frequently used as a tool to assert caste dominance and suppress rights-based assertions. I am working to resolve gaps in data regarding how systemic bias within police and judicial systems leads to high levels of impunity for crimes against these women, particularly in cases of sexual violence and forced labor.

## **Mapping Regional Hierarchies and Analogous Systems**

I am broadening my synthesis of systemic hierarchies by examining the specific manifestations of descent-based exclusion in Europe and the Americas. My research is uncovering how historical systems, such as the Cagots in Europe or the racialized social stratification affecting the Quilombolas and Palenqueros in Latin America, function as structural analogues to caste. I have observed that these systems are frequently anchored in deep-seated cultural notions of 'ritual pollution' or ancestral labor roles, which continue to dictate social boundaries and economic opportunities for women long after formal legal barriers have been dismantled.

## **India**

- Dalit Women: Represent ~16.6 % of India's female population (2011 Census) and face intersectional discrimination in education, employment, and access to justice.
- Caste Discrimination: India is a central site of caste-based exclusion affecting ~80 % of global CDWD communities (Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka combined).
- Gender Gap Index: India ranked near the bottom globally in gender parity measures

— reflecting broader gender inequality that compounds caste effects. (Gender inequality here includes labour force gaps, education, and political representation.)

## **Nepal**

- Dalits constitute ~13.2 % of Nepal's population; Dalit women experience severe exclusion due to caste and gender discrimination, including lower access to services and greater economic vulnerability.

## **Bangladesh**

- Estimated ~5.5–6.5 million Dalits (~4 % of population) face caste-like exclusion; no official caste data collected but research indicates continued marginalization of these groups, including women.

**Pakistan & Sri Lanka**

- Caste-affected communities exist with exclusionary practices; Dalit women in Pakistan often lack basic rights and face hazardous labour conditions identified in intersectionality reports.
- Sri Lanka’s caste effects persist in rural and social domains even without formal caste recognition.

**Europe**

- Roma women endure multiple layers of discrimination based on ethnicity, poverty, and gender — resulting in limited education and employment access.

**Brazil**

- Quilombola women descend from enslaved Africans; face structural racism and gendered barriers to land rights, services, and economic opportunities.

**Japan**

- Buraku social stigma is similar to caste; historically segregated groups still face prejudice that affects social mobility, marriage, employment, and wellbeing of Burakumin women.
- OECD World Risk Poll: A median 31 % of adults globally see unequal rights for men and women as a very big problem.
- Gender Parity Rankings (WEF Gender Gap): Countries like Pakistan, Sudan, Chad, and Niger are among the lowest in gender equality indices, indicating systemic gender stratification even absent formal caste categorization.

Country Region	Hierarchical System	Women’s Issues Highlights
India	Caste	Dalit women ~16.6 % population; deep exclusion across rights spheres
Nepal	Caste	Dalit women marginalized in services and
Country Region	Hierarchical System	Women’s Issues Highlights

		employment
Bangladesh	Caste-like	Millions face exclusion; lack of official caste stats
Pakistan	Caste-like	Hazardous labour and discrimination reports
Sri Lanka	Caste-like	Persistent social hierarchies
Europe (Roma)	Ethnicity	Barriers in education, health, employment
Brazil (Quilombola)	Race/Descent	Limited land rights & services
Japan (Burakumin)	Social stigma	Ongoing prejudice & exclusion
Mauritania (Hratin)	Descent	Severe gendered exclusion
Global	Gender inequality	31 % see unequal rights as very big problem

**DEFINITION & SCOPE**

CDWD refers to discrimination rooted in hereditary social status or ancestral occupation, often tied to notions of impurity and exclusion, which persists beyond South Asia across global regions

**Global CDWD Population**

270 million people worldwide belong to CDWD communities — representing about 3–4 % of global population — with Dalits constituting the largest share.

□ Women & Intersectional Exclusion

- CDWD women face compounded discrimination due to caste/descent hierarchies plus gender inequality, resulting in:
  - Lower access to education and employment opportunities
  - Exposure to gender-based violence
  - Lack of political representation
  - Restricted access to basic services (healthcare, sanitation)

**Country-Wise Research Table: CDWD Communities & Women’s Issues**

Community / Country	Estimated Population / Share	Core Discrimination Patterns	Key Women’s Issues / Data Points	Data Source
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<b>Dalits (India)</b>	~201 million (Scheduled Castes, 2011 Census)	Caste-based social exclusion; untouchability	Systemic barriers to education, employment, justice; earlier reports show <i>lower life expectancy for Dalit women vs others</i> (e.g., NFHS data comparison)	Dalits ~80 % of CDWD globally (~260–270m)
<b>Dalits (Nepal)</b>	~3.6 million (~13.6 % population)	Caste exclusion in social access and services	Limited access to education/work compared to non-Dalit women	Global CDWD estimations
<b>Dalits (Bangladesh)</b>	~5.5–6.5 million	Caste-like discrimination	Social exclusion impacting employment & rights	Global CDWD estimations
<b>Dalits (Pakistan)</b>	~1–2 million	Caste-based labour marginalization	High exposure to precarious work & social exclusion for women	Global CDWD estimations
<b>Dalits (Sri Lanka)</b>	~4–5 million	Social hierarchies with exclusion	Reduced access to services compared to majority	Global CDWD estimations
<b>Roma (Europe)</b>	~10–12 million across EU	Ethnic marginalisation, antigypsyism	62 % of Roma youth (16–24) NEET; <i>Roma women</i> face low inclusion & violence risks	European reports & youth data
<b>Burakumin (Japan)</b>	~1.5–3 million	Historical outcaste status linked to —impure work	Persistent employment & marriage discrimination; women affected by social stigma	Burakumin population estimates
<b>Osu (Nigeria)</b>	Not precisely quantified	Ancestral servitude / ritual exclusion	Women face restricted community integration and political participation	CDWD categories
<b>Haratine (Mauritania)</b>	Not precisely quantified	Descent-based slavery legacy	Extreme exclusion in access to education, jobs, and basic services; women face compounded stigma	CDWD categories
<b>Quilombola (Brazil)</b>	~1.3 million (community total)	Afro-descendant marginalisation; land insecurity	Land rights denied; access to services low; gender-based violence documented	Regional CDWD studies

Community / Country	Estimated Population / Share	Core Discrimination Patterns	Key Women's Issues / Data Points	Data Source
Palenquero (Colombia)	~6,600	Afro-Colombian marginalisation	Cultural exclusion; limited access to infrastructure and education	Regional CDWD studies

### What is CDWD?

- Definition: Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD) are groups marginalized due to inherited status and ancestral occupations.
- Core Principles:
  - Purity vs. Pollution: Notions that certain people are "unclean" by birth.
  - Occupational Stigma: Forced association with menial tasks (sanitation, leather work, etc.).
  - Endogamy: Socially enforced rules against marrying outside the group.
- Scale: Over 270 million people (approx. 4% of the global population).

### A Global Comparison of Communities

Region	Community	Context of Exclusion
South Asia	Dalits	"Untouchability," manual scavenging, and rigid caste hierarchy.
Europe	Roma	"Anti-Gypsyism," spatial segregation, and educational exclusion.
Japan	Burakumin	Historical "Eta" (outcast) status; discrimination in marriage and jobs.
Africa	Haratine / Osu	Descent-based slavery (Mauritania/Mali) and ritual outcasts (Nigeria).
Latin America	Quilombola / Palenque	Afro-descendant communities facing land theft and systemic neglect.

### Data on Systemic Exclusion (2025 Trends)

- **Modern Slavery:** In South Asia, CDWD groups account for a disproportionate percentage of bonded labor. In the Sahel (Africa), an estimated 1.9 million Haratines still live in slavery-like conditions.

- Educational Barriers: \* Roma in Europe: Frequent placement in "special schools" or segregated classrooms.
  - South Asia: High dropout rates among Dalit girls due to intersectional discrimination.
- Economic Exclusion:
  - 77% of Dalits in South Asia work in the informal economy.
  - Quilombolas in Brazil: Only 211 of 1,787 land-titling processes have been completed (as of late 2023/2024).

## Patterns of Social Exclusion

- Spatial Segregation: CDWD often reside in "ghettos" or "hamlets" (e.g., Buraku in Japan, Cheri in India) with poor access to water, electricity, and sanitation.
- Barriers to Political Power: Despite being 4% of the population, CDWD representation in high-level global governance remains negligible.
- Gendered Violence: Women from these communities face "triple discrimination"—based on gender, class, and descent.
  - Example: Haratine women in Mauritania are vulnerable to domestic servitude and sexual exploitation.

## Global Advocacy & The Path Forward

- UN Recognition: The term "CDWD" was formally recognized to unify these movements under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- Key Goals for 2026:
  - Disaggregated Data: Pushing governments to collect data specifically on CDWD status to track progress.
  - Legislative Reform: Moving from constitutional "equality" to active "protection" laws.
  - Land Rights: Prioritizing collective land titles for communities like the Quilombolas.

## Dalits – South Asia (India, Nepal, Pakistan)

- **Population:** ~16–18% of India's population
- **Literacy gap:** Dalit literacy ~10–15% lower than national average
- **Poverty:** Over 33% Dalits below poverty line (India)
- **Atrocities:** ~50,000 caste-based crime cases reported annually in India
- Concentration in sanitation work, manual scavenging, landless labour

## Roma – Europe

- **Population:** ~10–12 million across EU
- **Education:** ~30% Roma children complete primary education
- **Employment:** Unemployment rates 3–5 times higher than national averages
- **Housing:** Large share live in segregated settlements/slums
- Persistent racialisation and criminalisation

## Africa

### Haratine (Mauritania)

- ~40% of population
- Strong link to descent-based slavery
- Limited access to land ownership and political power

### Osu (Nigeria)

- Subject to ritual exclusion and marriage prohibitions
- Continued social ostracism despite legal bans

## Japan

- **Population:** ~3 million
- Historically linked to leatherwork, slaughter, sanitation
- Residential segregation persists
- Employment discrimination through family registry checks
- Under-representation in elite professions

## Latin America

- Descendants of escaped enslaved Africans
- **Brazil:** ~5,900 Quilombola communities identified
- Limited access to land titles and public services
- Higher poverty and maternal mortality rates
- Intersection of race, descent, and territory

## CONCLUSION

Caste and caste-like systems of social hierarchy are not confined to a single region or culture; they represent a global structure of inequality rooted in birth-based discrimination and inherited status. While the Dalit movement in India has historically provided a powerful framework of resistance, rights-based mobilization, and constitutional redress, comparative evidence shows

that similar regimes of exclusion operate across continents under different cultural and historical contexts.

Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD)—including Dalits, Roma, Haratine, Osu, Burakumin, Quilombola, and Palenque peoples—experience systemic marginalization marked by occupational stigma, spatial segregation, restricted access to education and political power, and heightened vulnerability to violence and forced labour. These patterns reveal that caste-like discrimination is structural rather than exceptional, sustained through social norms, economic dependence, and weak enforcement of legal protections. A global comparative understanding of caste thus challenges the tendency to view caste as an —Indian problem and instead situates it within the broader framework of international human rights and social justice. Recognizing CDWD as a global phenomenon is essential for strengthening transnational solidarity, informing inclusive public policy, and advancing international legal recognition of descent-based discrimination. Ultimately, dismantling caste and caste-like hierarchies requires collective global action, grounded in the lived experiences and resistance traditions of historically marginalized communities.

## 1. Shift from "Ritual" to "Structural" Frameworks

Historically, caste was analyzed through a "ritual" lens—focused on Hindu concepts of purity and pollution (Subedi, 2014, 2021). Recent research (2024–2025) has shifted toward a **structural and materialist analysis**, viewing caste as a mechanism for controlling labor, wealth, and land (Chhabria, 2023; Kafle, 2024).

## 2. Global "Descent-Based" Analogies

Scholars now categorize communities like the Dalits (South Asia), Roma (Europe), **Burakumin** (Japan), and **Haratine** (Africa) under the unified banner of **CDWD**.

The "Global Problem" Warning: Contemporary scholarship echoes Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's warning that migration would turn caste into a global issue. This is now evident in the legislative debates in California and the UK regarding caste discrimination in the diaspora (Kafle, 2024).

## 3. Intersection of Caste and Ecology (New for 2025)

A significant emerging field, "**Critical Caste Ecologies**," examines how caste hierarchies are reproduced through environmental factors.

- **Finding:** Caste determines access to "clean" resources and forces marginalized groups into hazardous ecological roles (e.g., manual scavenging or handling toxic agrochemicals).

- **Impact:** Climate change and environmental degradation disproportionately affect CDWD communities, who often lack land rights and live in high-vulnerability "ghettos" (Kafle, 2024).

#### 4. Health Disparities and "Allostatic Load"

Recent medical and sociological reviews (2024) have concluded that caste discrimination is a social determinant of health.

- **Epigenetic Impact:** Chronic stress from descent-based discrimination leads to an "allostatic load"—an imbalance in neuronal and hormonal functions that causes premature aging ("weathering") and higher rates of chronic diseases like hypertension and diabetes among CDWD groups (Rasali et al., 2024).

#### 5. Legal and International Recognition

There is a growing consensus that current International Human Rights Law (IHRL) is insufficient.

- **Critique:** IHRL often treats caste-based discrimination as a "recognition harm" (related to untouchability) rather than a "redistributive harm" (related to land and wealth) (Kafle, 2024).
- **Policy Conclusion:** Governments are increasingly advised to recognize caste as a protected category distinct from race, as it spans multiple religions and does not always fit ethnic or national definitions (Kafle, 2024).

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